

Digital Strategy Review – Carmarthenshire County Council

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Report summary

Report summary

Exhibit 1: report summary

The exhibit below summarises the reason we undertook this audit, our key findings and recommendations for the Council.

Why a strategic approach to digital is important

- 1 Digital technology is key to delivering a wide range of council services in a more economic, efficient and effective way. It is also an important means of councils delivering their wellbeing objectives and carrying out sustainable development.
- 2 Having a clearly articulated strategic approach to digital can bring several benefits such as:
 - establishing a common vision for use of digital and the intended outcomes for local communities linked to the council's strategic objectives;
 - helping to ensure that councils' use of digital technology is aligned with their key strategic objectives and other plans and strategies and is informed by a good understanding of current and future trends;
 - reducing the risk of duplication both within councils and with partners;
 - consideration of resourcing digital over the short, medium and longer term together; and
 - providing a framework against which to monitoring progress over the short, medium and long term.

The focus of our audit

- 3 We looked at the extent to which the Council's strategic approach to digital has been developed in accordance with the sustainable development principle and that it will help to secure value for money in the use of the Council's resources.

Our key findings

- 4 The Council has a clearly articulated strategic approach to digital, that is informed by a good understanding of current and future trends and is understood by key elected members and officers. There are strong governance arrangements to monitor the progress of digital projects supported by implementation plans that include milestone and performance measures. The Council has also reviewed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the delivery of its digital strategy and has applied learning from this to inform its strategic approach.
- 5 The Council's arrangements could be further strengthened through improved public engagement, clarifying how it could contribute to the national well-being goals and further exploring opportunities for partnership working. The Council

also aims to monitor value for money via project post-implementation reviews, however, these are not always completed, and achievement of savings is not always monitored.

Our recommendations for the Council

Involvement with stakeholders

- R1 To better understand the needs of citizens and the potential barriers to them using digital technology, the Council should involve citizens directly with their digital strategy.

Aligning the digital strategy with other public bodies

- R2 To avoid duplication and identify opportunities to deliver multiple benefits, the Council should ensure the digital strategy aligns with the wider public sector. To help achieve this, the Council should clarify how it contributes to the Seven National Well-being Goals and how it impacts on the well-being objectives of other public bodies.

Approach to collaboration

- R3 To strengthen its arrangements to secure effectiveness, efficiency and economy through partnership working in delivering its digital strategy, the Council should:
- map out which organisations it needs to work with;
 - assess the best opportunities to deliver more joined-up services and secure potential savings through collaboration; and
 - develop a method of assessing its partnerships.

Monitoring benefits

- R4 To better understand the impact of its digital approach, monitor value for money, and assess if identified benefits have been realised, the Council should:
- develop a way to capture the outcomes from digital projects; and
 - develop arrangements for identifying and sharing lessons learned from digital projects.

Detailed report

What we looked at and why – the scope of this audit

- 1 We reviewed the Council's strategic approach to digital, and specifically the extent to which this has been developed in accordance with the sustainable development principle; and that it will help to secure value for money in the use of the Council's resources.
- 2 Our findings are based on document reviews and interviews with a sample of Cabinet Members and senior officers. The evidence we have used to inform our findings is limited to these sources. We undertook this work between March and July 2023.
- 3 We set out to answer the question, **'In developing its digital strategy has the Council acted in accordance with the sustainable development principle and put in place proper arrangements to secure value for money in the use of its resources?'** We did this by exploring the following questions:
 - Is the Council's digital strategy informed by a good understanding of current and future trends?
 - Does the Council have a clear vision of what it wants to achieve through the use of digital technology?
 - Is the Council working effectively with the right people and partners to design and deliver its digital strategy?
 - Has the Council resourced delivery of its digital strategy so it can deliver long-term/preventative benefits?
 - Is the Council monitoring and reviewing progress?
 - Is the Council learning lessons from how it works?
- 4 **Appendix 1** contains the detailed questions we set out to answer along with the audit criteria we used to arrive at our findings.

Why we undertook this audit

- 5 This audit was undertaken to help fulfil the Auditor General's duties under section 17 of the Public Audit (Wales) Act 2004 (the 2004 Act) and section 15 of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015.
- 6 We sought to:
 - provide assurance that councils' digital strategies will help to deliver well-being objectives in a way that secures value for money in the use of resources;

- provide assurance that councils are acting in accordance with the sustainable development principle in the design of their digital strategies;
- explain how councils are using/planning to use digital technology to meet people's needs and deliver better outcomes; and
- inspire and empower councils and other public sector bodies by identifying and sharing examples of notable practice/approaches where relevant.

The Council's digital strategy

- 7 The Council has three digital strategies:
- the Digital Transformation Strategy 2021-2024;
 - the Digital Technology Strategy 2022-2025; and
 - the Digital Schools' Strategy 2022-2025.
- 8 The Council describes the Digital Transformation Strategy 2021-2024 as its over-arching strategy. It has produced three separate strategies to make the documents more accessible to its residents. The vision of the Digital Transformation Strategy 2021-2024 is, 'A digitally-enabled Carmarthenshire' and it has four, key priority areas:
- involvement – enabling citizens to get the services and information they need online.
 - workforce – involving and communicating with staff in everything the Council does. Supporting the Council's workforce in adopting flexible working practices to optimise performance in the delivery of quality and cost-effective services.
 - connectivity – enabling residents and businesses in the Council to use digital technology to enhance their lives.
 - innovation – innovative digital solutions will enable increased collaboration.
- 9 The Digital Transformation Strategy 2021-2024 outlines the high-level investment plans to achieve these key priorities:
- £600,000 to transform the way services are delivered online;
 - £440,000 to replace an ageing technology infrastructure to support a digital workplace;
 - £400,000 to enhance voice and data networks and meet increasing bandwidth requirements;
 - £270,000 to enhance online security and counter risks from cyberattack; and
 - £114,000 to train staff to exploit latest technologies.

- 10 The Council also has a Transformation Strategy 2022 with the vision of 'Delivering substantial and rapid internal change over a five-year period to allow the Council to successfully deliver its aims and objectives as set out within its Corporate Strategy.' One of the eight workstreams under this strategy is 'Customers and Digital Transformation'. The aim of this workstream is to make better use of technology to deliver smarter, efficient service processes and to deliver a better experience for customers.
- 11 The 'Customer and Digital Transformation' workstream is supported by an annual £200,000 Digital Transformation Steering Group capital fund. The Digital Transformation Strategy 2021-2024 is also supported by an annual £100,000 Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Strategic Development capital fund.

What we found: the Council has a clear and well-developed strategic approach to digital but does not consistently evaluate its impact

The Council has a well-articulated digital strategy

- 12 The Council has a clear vision in place for what it wants to achieve through the use of digital technology and has communicated that vision across the organisation. The Council's strategic approach to digital is set out in its Digital Transformation Strategy 2021-2024, and the Customer and Digital workstream contained in its Transformation Strategy 2022. The vision is understood across services and among key Elected Members. This means there is a wide and common understanding of what the Council is trying to achieve.
- 13 The Council is also planning over an appropriate timescale. It has considered what long term means for its digital approach and has adopted the three-to-five-year timeframe to reflect that digital technology is constantly changing at an ever-increasing pace. There are examples within the strategy documents of longer-term thinking where current projects lay the foundation for future development. These include the digital infrastructure investment as part of the Swansea Bay City Deal, the move from legacy systems to a cloud-first approach, and the improved access to digital services for citizens. This means that the Council can demonstrate that its strategic approach includes planning for the longer term and reduces the risk of reliance on short-term interventions that may provide less value for money over the longer term.
- 14 The Council has considered the wider impacts of its digital strategy across the Council but has not yet fully considered how these relate to the objectives of other public sector bodies. The Council has clearly aligned its digital approach with its other strategic goals and plans. The Digital Transformation Strategy

explains how it integrates with other Council plans, such as the Corporate Strategy 2022-2027, the Cabinet Vision Statement, the Net Carbon Zero Plan, and the Welsh Language Strategy. The Corporate Strategy 2022-2027 clearly explains the role of digital in achieving its well-being objective relating to modernising and developing a resilient and efficient Council. The Council has created its strategic approach to digital after consulting a range of national strategies and professional bodies. Whilst the Council has referred to the Seven National Wellbeing Goals when developing its digital strategy, it does not explain how its strategy contributes to the goals. Similarly, the Council has not fully considered how the delivery of its digital approach will impact on other public bodies. Aligning its strategy with other public bodies would reduce the risk of duplication and help to identify opportunities to deliver multiple benefits.

- 15 The Council's digital approach is based on a good understanding of current and future trends. This was informed by:
- consultation with a range of national strategies and professional bodies.
 - a self-reflection on its ICT Service as part of writing its annual Divisional Delivery Plan. This allows the service to identify key areas of improvement to action in the following year.
 - identification of key risks to its digital strategy and lists these in its Divisional Delivery Plan.
 - an audit of the digital estate and infrastructure before writing its Digital Technology Strategy.
 - a series of ICT seminars to engage with officers and Elected Members. These seminars are designed to enable two-way communication, showcase digital developments and collect user feedback. In 2023, the seminars included a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis of the ICT Service.
 - an expression of interest (EOI) process to capture work requests for digital projects from service managers. The EOI asks what needs to be delivered; what delivery of the work will achieve; what are the consequences of not doing the work; and what funding is needed.
- 16 The Council is focused on not removing or downgrading traditional means of communication as it expands online services. Face-to-face and telephone options will still be available to ensure all residents are able to contact the Council. The Council aims to ensure residents have a choice to use the channel that best meets their needs. However, the Council has not directly engaged with citizens in developing its digital strategy. The Council's ICT Service describes itself as an enabler, working with services rather than citizens directly. The Service assumes other service areas complete engagement activity as part of their development work before involving ICT. Whilst services do engage with citizens on individual projects, involving citizens in the Council's digital approach would allow it to better understand citizens' needs and identify barriers to them using digital technology.

The Council recognises the importance of partnership working but it has not considered all opportunities and does not routinely monitor the effectiveness of existing partnerships

- 17 The Council recognises the importance of partnership working in delivering its digital strategy. The Council's first Digital Strategy 2017-2021 identified Digital Collaboration as one of six priority areas and it aimed to improve information sharing with other organisations and partners; and increase the sharing of software and hardware across the region. The Council's current Divisional Delivery Plan for the ICT Service identifies the need to work with internal and external partners to deliver its digital approach. It also contains a number of actions which rely on collaboration. The Council's Transformation Strategy highlights the importance of the principles of collaboration and partnership working. The projects contained in the Swansea Bay City Deal all rely on partnership working across the regional footprint.
- 18 However, the Council has not completed formal stakeholder analysis to identify who it needs to work with. We also found no evidence of how the Council formally monitors the effectiveness of its existing partnerships. Mapping out who and how it could work with partners would help the Council have assurance that it has identified all appropriate opportunities for partnership working. It could also help identify opportunities to improve value for money in the delivery of its digital strategy. Monitoring the effectiveness of partnership arrangements is also an important part of arrangements for the Council to assure itself that they are achieving value for money.
- 19 The Council has not entered into partnership arrangements for the purpose of achieving economies of scale in the procurement of digital technology. Collaborative procurement can enable partners to pool their resources and leverage their collective buying power to achieve better deals from suppliers while reducing costs and improving value for money.

The Council resources the delivery of its digital strategy to deliver long-term benefits, but there are weaknesses in its evaluation arrangements

- 20 We found strong evidence that the Council invests in its strategic digital approach, balancing short-term and long-term investments, and allocating resources to deliver better outcomes in the long term. The Council views digital as a pivotal enabler of change for driving transformational improvement to all services and has allocated significant annual funds to support digital transformation. This includes annual capital funding of £200,000 for the Digital Transformation Steering Group and £100,000 for the ICT Service.

- 21 A key condition of receiving capital funding is the relevant service must commit to and budget for the ongoing revenue costs for a sustainable transformation. To secure funding, project proposals must outline the expected savings and benefits the project will deliver. A number of services have also funded dedicated digital staff posts to help them implement digital transformation. These services consider this as an invest-to save opportunity. They recognise the need to invest in a dedicated resource to facilitate digital transformation without competing with other services for a finite corporate resource.
- 22 The Council has also demonstrated a willingness to invest now for longer-term savings, and officers are aware that upfront costs will lead to future savings. For example, the Council is replacing ageing operating systems, installing new broadband networks, and exploring the use of Artificial Intelligence (to help sort plastics in kerbside collections) to improve efficiency and generate savings. This demonstrates that the Council is considering value for money and the sustainability of its approach over the longer term.
- 23 The Council's arrangements for monitoring the achievement of efficiency savings from its digital projects are variable. It maintains a rolling spreadsheet of quantifiable savings it has achieved through delivering digital projects. However, the Council has recognised the need to develop a way to better capture the outcomes from its process automation project, such as the delivery of efficiency savings. It has also recognised the difficulty in evaluating long-term savings. For example, it has not evaluated the savings achieved by providing 80% of employees with laptops as part of the agile working project. Evaluating whether or not digital projects delivered intended savings is an important element of monitoring the value for money of individual projects and the digital strategy overall. Officers acknowledge they need to strengthen these arrangements going forward.
- 24 Despite the Council aiming to monitor the value for money of projects through post project implementation reviews, these are not always carried out or recorded. Completing and sharing post-implementation reviews should help the Council to assess whether it achieved its original aims, secured value for money, and learned lessons to improve future projects.

The Council has strong arrangements for measuring progress against short and medium-term objectives

- 25 The Council has clear governance arrangements in place for monitoring the progress of digital projects within its strategies. The Council has identified clear visions, aims, priorities, and key projects in all of its digital strategies for the three to five-year lives of the strategies. These are supported by implementation plans at service and workstream levels that have milestones,

performance measures and key actions. This enables the Council to monitor progress with in implementing its digital strategy.

- 26 The Council completes an annual self-evaluation of its ICT Service, produces a Digital Transformation Annual Progress Report, and collects feedback from officers and Elected Members through a series of workshops focused on digital. These help the Council to review the effectiveness of its strategic approach to digital.
- 27 The Council has also formally reviewed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the delivery of its digital strategy and has applied this learning to its future direction. This includes making use of the advances in the use of technology to widen access to services as well as automating back-office processes.
- 28 The Council has no formal process for sharing lessons learned from the implementation of its digital strategies. Project managers complete closure reports for individual projects, and these have lessons learned sections. But the Council does not collate these at a strategic level. Whilst the ICT Service completes an annual self-evaluation to identify areas of improvement, it does not proactively share that learning with the rest of the organisation (although it does publicise this in its Divisional Delivery Plan). By not routinely sharing lessons learned from the implementation of its digital strategies, the Council risks missing opportunities to improve processes, outcomes and its arrangements to secure value for money.

Appendix 1

Audit questions and audit criteria

Below are the questions we sought to answer in carrying out this audit, along with the audit criteria we used to arrive at our findings.

Main audit question: **In developing its digital strategy has the Council acted in accordance with the sustainable development principle and put in place proper arrangements to secure value for money in the use of its resources?**

Exhibit 2: audit questions and audit criteria

Level 2 questions	Level 3 questions	Criteria
1. Is the Council's digital strategy informed by a good understanding of current and future trends?	1.1 Is there is a thorough understanding of the 'as is' (i.e. current demand/issues to be addressed) and the reasons why/underlying causes?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Council has drawn on a broad range of information from internal and external sources to develop a thorough understanding of the 'as is' and how it is likely to change. This includes information (including data) relating to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – service sustainability/resilience and resourcing challenges. – the needs of citizens and communities. – the underlying causes of current demand/issues to be addressed. – analysis of future trends and how they might impact, e.g., social, economic/political, environmental, cultural or technological. They might include known trends e.g., ageing population, depleting natural resources and particularly technological advances. They might also include those with a higher level of uncertainty e.g., jobs and skills needed in the future. • The analysis of the 'as is' and how it is likely to change is well informed by involvement activity, as appropriate, that reflects recognised good practice
	1.2 Is there a thorough understanding of the long-term factors that will impact and the challenges and opportunities that may result (e.g. risks and opportunities)?	

Level 2 questions	Level 3 questions	Criteria
		<p>(eg National Principles for Public Engagement in Wales, Future Generations Commissioner for Wales advice and guidance).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Council uses its evidence base effectively to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – identify actions in its strategic approach to digital that are likely to be most effective and why, including how they could address the root causes of problems; – inform decisions around its use of digital technology that seek to balance the need to meet short and longer-term objectives.
<p>2. Does the Council have a clear vision of what it wants to achieve through the use of digital technology?</p>	<p>2.1 Is the Council planning over an appropriate timescale?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Council has considered what long term means in planning its approach to digital – ie how far ahead it can/should plan and why (at least ten years with consideration of longer-term trends as appropriate). • The Council has considered how actions can deliver the best impact over that timeframe in terms of outcomes and most effective use of resources. This could include consideration of appropriate intervention points linked to the Commissioner’s definition of prevention. (More details can be found in: Taking account of the Well-being of Future Generations Act in the budget process – The Future Generations Commissioner for Wales). • The Council has set out measures for its digital strategy that reflect short and long-term impacts and value for money, with milestones that reflect progress as appropriate. • The Council has set out how its digital strategy will be resourced over the longer term as far as is practical (see also criteria relating to integration).
	<p>2.2 Has the Council thought about the wider impacts its</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Council has considered how its digital strategy can make a contribution across the well-being goals.

Level 2 questions	Level 3 questions	Criteria
	<p>digital strategy could have, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • how could it contribute to each of the seven national well-being goals? • how delivery will impact on the other things it is trying to achieve (ie its well-being objectives and wider priorities)? • how delivery will impact on other what other public bodies are trying to achieve (ie their well-being objectives)? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff developing the digital strategy understand what colleagues and partners do and how their work relates and have sought to integrate their work with that of their colleagues from across the Council and with partner organisations. • Integration is evident in the alignment of the digital strategy with other key corporate strategies and service plans. For example medium-term financial plan, workforce plan, asset management strategies, well-being statement and carbon reduction plans. • The digital strategy is aligned with other strategic intents such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – customer experience; – management of demand/reductions in demand failure and prevention; and – design and implementation of new service delivery models. • The Council's digital strategy aligns with the plans/strategies of local and national partners including the Welsh Government's Digital Strategy for Wales Digital strategy and well-being plans.
	<p>2.3 Is there a wide and common understanding of what the Council is trying to achieve?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Councillors and senior officers responsible for implementing the digital strategy have a common and clear understanding of what the Council is trying to achieve and the intended impact on service delivery. • The Council's digital strategy is clearly communicated to staff and partners who may help deliver it.

Level 2 questions	Level 3 questions	Criteria
<p>3. Is the Council working effectively with the right people and partners to design and deliver its digital strategy</p>	<p>3.1 Has the Council identified who it needs to involve?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Council has a good understanding of who will be directly and indirectly affected by its digital strategy and who it needs to involve. • The Council has effectively involved the full diversity of views in developing its digital strategy, including from non-traditional sources and from those it may have previously failed to reach.
	<p>3.2 Is the Council effectively involving the full diversity of people affected by its digital strategy?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Council has provided genuine opportunities for people to influence the design and delivery of its digital strategy from an early stage, including representatives of groups who share protected characteristics. • The Council has used the results of involvement to shape the design and delivery of its digital strategy.
	<p>3.3 Is the Council collaborating effectively with the right partners?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Council is collaborating to ensure it delivers better outcomes and value for money through its digital strategy and has put appropriate arrangements in place to support this, for example for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – sharing or pooling expertise and resources; – sharing information; – ensuring effective monitoring, evaluation and accountability including consideration of value for money.

Level 2 questions	Level 3 questions	Criteria
<p>4. Has the Council resourced delivery of its digital strategy so it can deliver long-term/preventative benefits?</p>	<p>4.1 Does the Council understand long-term resource implications?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Council has assessed the costs and benefits of using digital technology to invest in long-term, preventative approaches and the cost (both financial and in terms of outcomes) of not doing so. • The Council has thought about the resources it will need to deliver its digital strategy over the medium and longer term (whole life costs) and how it could manage risks/meet those costs including, for example, planned 'invest to save' initiatives and managed reductions in technical debt. • The Council has calculated and set out any savings it intends to make through implementing its digital strategy.
	<p>4.2 Does the Council allocate resources to deliver better outcomes over the long-term?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Action (including preventative action) that is likely to contribute to better outcomes and/or use of resources over the longer term is promoted and supported, even: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – where this may limit the ability to meet some short-term needs; – where the benefits are likely to be accrued by or attributed to another organisation.

Level 2 questions	Level 3 questions	Criteria
5. Is the Council monitoring and reviewing progress?	5.1 Is the Council monitoring and reviewing progress towards, short, medium and longer-term objectives?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Council monitors the costs and benefits of delivering its digital strategy from a value for money perspective. • The Council is measuring the wider contribution the digital strategy is making across its own/partnership objectives. • Progress is measured against short, medium and long-term objectives.
6. Is the Council learning lessons from how it works?	6.1 Does the Council review the effectiveness of its digital strategy?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Council regularly reviews the effectiveness of its digital strategy including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – effectiveness of its collaborative activity; – effectiveness of its involvement activity, including the impact of the strategy on service users including those who are digitally excluded; – the impact of the strategy on those who share protected characteristics; – the economy, efficiency and effectiveness of the digital strategy overall in helping the Council to achieve its strategic objectives. • The Council has reviewed lessons learned from its response to the pandemic and is applying this learning to its digital strategy.
	6.2 Does the Council share lessons learned from its approach to its digital strategy?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Council shares and applies any lessons learned from the development and delivery of its digital strategy widely across the organisation, and with partners where relevant.



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